CHARITY, ANONYMITY, AND THE POWER OF THE HEROIC CROWD

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ABSTRACT

In the changing landscape of online communication, charitable nonprofit organizations address new challenges in connecting with audiences. Public forum conversations can drastically affect a nonprofit’s reputation and work, as evidenced by Invisible Children’s controversial campaign, Kony 2012. This raises the question: how should charities address online platforms, specifically user identifiability and anonymity, in the digital age? Using a combination of digital ethnography, grounded theory, and discourse analysis, this thesis addresses conversations about two nonprofit organizations on three different public forums to determine how identifiability affects the civility of the online experience in these contexts. This comparative analysis sheds light upon the variety of cultural elements that affect the human experience of online conversation platforms. More specifically, the data suggests that real name policies do not prevent harassment or personal attacks, but place identity (rather than ideas) at the center of conversation. As participants in charitable campaigns are typically motivated by altruism, of which anonymity is a key element, fostering idea-centric conversation may be more conducive to the success of charitable campaigns. The study concludes by offering an alternative content strategy, suggesting that charities allow, defend, and engage with online anonymity in order to harness the generous altruism of humans on the Internet.
This project would never have taken shape without the following people:

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Wholeheartedly,
Katie Zoan Gach
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INTRODUCTION

In 1895, Gustave Le Bon wrote, “a crowd is often criminal, but also it is often heroic” (Ch. 1). This observation articulated what many had suspected: individuals behave differently in crowds than in isolation. Building on Le Bon’s theories for the past twelve decades, sociologists and psychologists have attempted to explain these behavioral phenomena. Their theories tend to agree that the key elements of crowd behavior are associated with anonymization; individuals assume a collective identity and act as one.

Anonymized crowd behavior takes a recognizable, yet different shape in the digital world. The Internet and its communication technologies can facilitate anonymity and provide a space for collective action in the form of speech. Anonymous speech in the “digital commons” is controversial across disciplines. Legally, it is challenging to hold individuals accountable for threatening, harassing, or hateful speech. Sociologically, anonymity allows for one person to interact with others differently than they would in physical settings, and to explore alternative identities and behaviors. Collectively, anonymity can facilitate rapid aggregation of speech and action toward a variety of ends.

Anonymous content can be funny, annoying, or completely illegal and difficult to reprimand. It is a complex issue, and neither definitively positive nor negative. Anonymity and identifiability exist on what I call a “spectrum of visibility.” In a pilot study of that title, I identified the levels of visibility that donors may choose when interacting with nonprofit organizations. Aside from establishing this core concept, the pilot study showed that each level of donor identifiability has significant implications for nonprofit organizations. Anonymity or
low visibility is an essential value that donors hold, yet none of the organizations I examined had a strategy to address it.

But anonymity is no longer an assumed element of online communication. The controversy of online anonymity has resulted in platform solutions and proposed legislation such as China’s identification requirement and South Korea’s real-name registration (Chosun). Such policies force a certain level of online identifiability, essentially cutting off an entire end of the spectrum of visibility. Referring back to Le Bon, real name policies tend to be based on the school of thought that finds crowd anonymity to be dubious. Platforms that remove the option to be anonymous attempt to deter harassing, hateful, dangerous, and illegal behavior. But that “solution” could have some implications for online conversation forums—an arena where crowd anonymity has been quite heroic.

On the Internet, where interactions are mostly text-based, speech essentially constitutes action (Citron). But donations constitute another type of anonymous action for which there is little vocabulary. Crowdfunding projects and social media campaigns have used the power of online communication to raise an innumerable sum of money for worthy causes, all while juggling this essential element of philanthropy that is anonymous donorship. This outlines the complex relationship between charities and anonymity: in donorship, anonymity is generally positive and expected, but in conversations on public forums, it is largely problematic.

To examine how identifiability affects conversations about charities and their digital campaigns, this paper explores two nonprofit organizations on three different forums with varying user policies. This forms a comparative discourse analysis of both identifiable versus

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a Both of these examples contrast with the German ban on any platform’s use of real name policy, which was successfully contested by Facebook last year (Lomas).
anonymous users, as well as the everyday versus anomalous communications about the two nonprofits to determine if conversations and experiences in these forums vary. This thesis employs Lawrence Lessig’s framework to discuss the forces that govern the Internet: architecture/code, markets, norms, and law. Within this framework, data includes the functionality, financial concerns, policies, and cultural elements of each forum, focusing most specifically on the latter two.

Addressing anonymity in consideration of these forces, I will review conversations on three public forums regarding both the ALS Association and the Susan G. Komen Foundation. These forums, Facebook, reddit, and Buzzfeed, maintain differing user identification policies. Analyzing the discourse in context provides substantial data regarding the true effects of both anonymity and real name policies. This analysis attempts to communicate the human experience of participating in these conversation spaces, along with deciphering the meaning and effects of that experience.

In the end, the analysis reveals that social norms (of which identifiability is only one) and other cultural factors shape the discourse surrounding charity. This further supports Danah Boyd’s insistence that norms, rather than policies, are the way to build safe online public spaces. This is good news for charities: it opens up the avenues of discussion by revealing key components of communication on currently under-explored platforms, while providing solid, research-based reasons to maintain the online anonymity within which so many donors engage. If the technology and motives behind anonymous donorship have any parallels or connections to the current conversation about anonymous speech—a tension between protecting free speech and punishing harassment—the current proposals to address unprotected anonymous online
speech could have yet-to-be-acknowledged repercussions for charities. Yet, if charities are able to engage with anonymous online communities, they may find unexpected allies for good.

**LITERATURE AND TOPICAL REVIEW**

**CHARITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

Fundraising in the current digital context is becoming both easier and immensely more complex. Direct mailings, carefully crafted commercials, and perfectly-worded email newsletters have taken a backseat to content “going viral”. While a rapidly-spreading message is ideal for popularizing a worthy cause, this phenomenon is prone to controversy. As one blogger noted, “…you can’t have anything go the slightest bit viral without someone stepping in and saying, ‘Well, actually, no, this is all a bunch of garbage’” (Giles). The network architecture of online platforms where a story can be shared makes it easier to rapidly lose control over the content that nonprofits work so hard to craft.

Sometimes this is a positive thing, as in the case of the ALSA Ice Bucket Challenge during the summer of 2014. The explosive popularity of that campaign brought in an estimated $115 million for ALSA (alsa.org). But with that viral success came equally sharable and unprecedented scrutiny. The ALSA narrative came under the control of the Internet mob in the form of clever think-pieces, works of investigative journalism, and a growing school of thought that all charities are probably a scam, but especially this one.

No organization knows this storm of backlash better than Invisible Children. When their 30-minute documentary, *Kony 2012*, went viral in March of 2012, the self-reportedly “young”
organization nearly fell apart. *Kony 2012* was a catastrophic game-changer for Invisible Children. In a telepresence event with Georgetown University in March of 2014, Invisible Children’s Director of Public Relations Noelle West said, “something like this is much more detrimental to a nonprofit, because that's our currency: people believing in us.” She spoke further about what it takes to rebuild trust after such a phenomenon, especially the importance of building a network of validators: independent supporters who will speak on your behalf in a variety of contexts.\(^b\) Invisible Children’s experience confirms that online conversations can directly affect nonprofit organizations.

It is not only young organizations that experience this type of crisis; the everyday operations of well-established organizations fall under consistent criticism. Over the past several years, criticism of the Susan G. Komen foundation has been so consistent that some dissenters have formed their own nonprofit: Think Before You Pink. TBYP calls for, “more transparency and accountability by companies that take part in breast cancer fundraising, and encourages consumers to ask critical questions about pink ribbon promotions” (thinkbeforeyoupink.org). Furthermore, in some of the forums examined here, the Komen foundation stands as shorthand for ineffective, untrustworthy charity work. No nonprofits are immune to uncontrolled narratives.

When receiving large amounts of online attention, the nonprofit’s narrative falls under the control of the spaces where conversations happen: the comments sections of social networks, blogs, news sites, and the charity’s own site(s). The identifiability of commenters in these spaces—supporters, donors, and critics alike—spans the entirety of the spectrum of visibility,

\(^b\) This presentation by Noelle West was shared at the gnovis conference, organized by GU’s Communication, Culture, and Technology program. Noelle was specifically asked to share what Invisible Children learned from the negative response to *Kony 2012*. Her insights and wisdom were foundational to the initial questions of this paper.
from untraceable to readily identifiable, creating distinct cultures of interaction in each online space where they are found.

**Online Anonymity – The Shape of the Mob**

Policy discussions about online user anonymity and identifiability apply to context of online charity campaigns in how supporters and dissenters engage in conversation. At the core of this discussion is the Constitutional right to free speech. The legal issue of anonymous speech typically has two sides: the protection against repercussion for speaking out against popular ideas or oppressive governments, and the “troll” side in which massive amounts of harmful, constitutionally *un*protected speech go unchecked and unpunished. Margot Kaminski adds another school of thought, framing free speech in either a literary or political sense (823). The current difficulty of identifying users of various platforms makes it a lofty challenge to balance the protection of user data with the protection of users against illegal speech.

Historically, the protection of anonymous speech has allowed for the safe, necessary expression of unpopular opinions—speech that is worth protecting. Nissenbaum writes, “Where society places high value on the types of expression and transaction that anonymity protects, it must necessarily enable unreachability” (142). But the measures that protect “high value” expressions drag lesser speech under their umbrella. En masse, this allows the flock of actors known as Anonymous to thrive. Gabriella Coleman has written at length about this mysterious and powerful group: how they (sort of) form, collaborate, and act in such a way that has made them the Robin Hood of the Internet. It is difficult to grasp. Coleman describes Anonymous as,

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\(^c\) This is the central question of Elonis v. US, which will be discussed later.
a cluster of ideas and ideals adopted by these people and centered around the concept of anonymity; a banner for collective actions online and in the real world that have ranged from fearsome but trivial pranks, to technological support for Arab revolutions (83).

Those drawn to this group seem to hold similar ideologies, giving them both common allies and common enemies—a digital embodiment of crowd behavior. Combining these commonalities with the skills of “geeks and hackers,” “political activities are rooted in concrete experiences of their craft—administering a server or editing videos—skills channeled toward bolstering civil liberties, such as privacy” (Coleman 2). The larger point of Coleman’s paper is the difficulty of doing a typical anthropological ethnography on such an ephemeral group. Though they act together, they are not a unified whole. “Anonymous is not unanimous” (Coleman 4).

Nevertheless, this phenomenon of the anonymous online mob results in waves of common action. Citron uses the term “deindividuation” (coined by Zimbardo in 1969) to describe what happens when anonymous or pseudonymous individuals form a collective response in an online context. The response is less dependent upon anonymity itself, and more likely attributed to the lack of repercussions, which can range from legal action to unauthorized publication of personal data.

We know anonymity has less of an effect than we might think toward encouraging abusive behavior: these people are “trolls” in real life, too. The major thing isn’t anonymity so much as it is non-accountability: there is no tangible, negative consequence for treating someone awfully (Moosa).

That reality is at the core of theories of deindividuation. Deindividuation is observable when, as Le Bon wrote, “an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those
of the individuals composing it” (Ch. 3). Philip Zimbardo expanded upon this observation following the famous Milgram experiments, theorizing that deindividuation is an altered state of consciousness, allowing members of the crowd to feel less responsibility for the situation at hand. Consider it the opposite of the bystander effect: actions (rather than inactions) are prompted by the reduction of perceived consequences to the individual. Social psychology currently maintains Diener’s definition of deindividuation: a loss of self-awareness in group members (Diener 1980). This theory goes far in explaining and contextualizing the extraordinary and alarming behavior carried out by all varieties of anonymous online mobs.

But what of the consequences of unidentified behavior? Kaminski compares harmful online anonymous mobs to historically comparable groups like the KKK, and proposed Internet legislation to anti-mask statutes that resulted from hate crimes. She opines that anti-mask statutes are the ideal physical parallel to be used in legal cases addressing anonymous action, and that these statutes offer important insights to the various proposals that address the harms of online anonymity. The statutes basically allow for masks in cases of costumes or protection from harm, but disallow masks in threatening situations, or when actually committing a crime. For example, most states do not allow wearing a mask in a bank at any time (848).

As early as the Civil Rights Movement, the intentions behind anti-mask statutes were tied to personal identifiability and data. Kaminski compares one case from 1928 in which the list of an association’s members—in this case, the KKK—was judged to be a public record, making it easier to identify and prosecute perpetrators of hate crimes. However, that same ruling needed to

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\[d\] The controversial psychological experiments, performed at Yale University in the 1960s, explored authority and obedience. See Milgram, S., “Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View.” (1974)
be changed thirty years later when it was applied to a chapter of the NAACP, a vulnerable group for whom identifiability could (and often did) lead to hate crimes. Disclosure of data threatened the freedom of speech, in this case defining association as speech. (833). In light of growing national concerns about data privacy, the NAACP case was something of a warning.

But one must not be completely anonymous for deindividuation to occur. In a recent white paper for the Future of Privacy Forum, Jules Polonetsky describes identifiability on a spectrum of data, laid out from non-personal to personal based on ease of re-identifying an individual with the information in question and the measures taken to prevent re-identification.

Similarly, Helen Nissenbaum makes a distinction between simple namelessness and unreachability: “the value of anonymity lies not in the capacity to be unnamed, but in the possibility of acting or participating while remaining out of reach. [...] Namelessness by itself is no longer sufficient for protecting what is at stake in anonymity” (142). Furthermore, Gary Marx
identifies “seven types of identity knowledge, involving legal name, location, symbols linked and not linked back to these through intermediaries, distinctive appearance and behavior patterns, social categorization, and certification via knowledge or artifacts” (99).

Not all individual or anonymous speech is protected by the First Amendment. Section 18 of the United States Code states that “unprotected speech is limited to, (a) obscenity, (b) defamation, (c) fraud, (d) incitement, (e) true threats, and (f) speech integral to criminal conduct. Speech that does not fall into these exceptions remains protected [...]” (18 U.S.C. § 2261A[2]). Balancing the privacy and protection of speakers has come down to technicalities in recent cases, such as Elonis v. US. In this case, the Supreme Court was asked to further define a “true threat”:

Whether, [...] conviction of threatening another person under 18 U.S.C. § 875(c) requires proof of the defendant’s subjective intent to threaten, [...] or whether it is enough to show that a “reasonable person” would regard the statement as threatening (SCOTUSblog).

As the defendant posted the threat on Facebook, a site with a strict real name policy, the question of identifiability or anonymity may not seem particularly relevant. But it is a core issue: this is a case in which a known, identifiable user allegedly threatened and harassed someone. Though he initially posted the threat under a pseudonym, the man ultimately wanted his victim to know what he thought, and attempted to mitigate the consequences by claiming his words were protected artistic expression. e

For social networking sites, user retention relies upon the formation of desirable connections and discourse among those users. According to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, the websites through which these questionable communications pass are

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e Violent rap lyrics as artistic expression are currently a difficult issue for the SCOTUS. See Howe, Amy: http://www.scotusblog.com/2014/12/court-difficult-to-read-on-facebook-threats-in-plain-english/
never liable for the content of their users (Grimmelmann 182). However, it is typically in the best interest of those sites to maintain a communications environment in which harassment and hate speech do not happen.

Website policy leaders—especially on the most populated social networking sites—have maintained that real name policies are a “silver bullet” solution to harassment and hate speech. Many believe that such policies should govern the Internet as a whole (Bernstein). However, real name policies are not without negative externalities. Facebook’s policy has recently made headlines regarding its inability to recognize real names that may not be adequately “authenticated” by their process (which relies upon users reporting the violations of others), particularly those of transgender and Native American individuals. For this reason, online identifiability policies are increasingly recognized as a civil rights issue. Citron reports that “Although in theory anonymous online mods could attack anyone, in practice they overwhelmingly target members of traditionally subordinated groups, particularly women.” (65).

According to Cho and Acquisti, real name policies “[force] commenters to publicly and personally identify themselves – under the expectation that public identification may lead to more civil discourse.” Cho and Acquisti performed content analysis of comments on news websites to determine how that discourse is affected by anonymity and pseudonymity. Their results are significant: “A key conclusion of these findings is that commenters are more likely to use offensive words under the less identifiable conditions.” Based on this data, it is a valid supposition that real name policies reduce unprotected speech. Harassers or trolls can be

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This paper acknowledges similar research with the opposite outcome: “some scholars suggest that high level of anonymity could be beneficial in a certain context (Grudin 2002; Lampe and Resnick 2004; Ren and Kraut 2011)” (Cho).
punished, so there is incentive to be civil. It is an intuitive conclusion, but it is not entirely accurate.

When real name policies are not in place, one might expect that anything goes and all is chaos. The methods section of this thesis will outline some of my primary research that indicates the opposite, suggesting that a site’s cultural norms (rather than its policies) are the larger force in determining civility of conversations. This hypothesis is confirmed by Kraut, Kisler, and Resnik: “In thriving communities, a rough consensus eventually emerges about the range of behaviors that the managers and most members consider acceptable, what we will call normative behaviors, and another range of behaviors that are beyond the pale” (125). This behavior is evident on reddit.com, known as “The Front Page of the Internet.” Notably, reddit’s users have done some amazing things for people who express financial need in its forums. Platforms like IndieGoGo and GoFundMe allow some verifiability to these stories, and give interested parties an easy way to help. And in the spirit of reddit’s no-real-names policy, users often donate anonymously. Though anonymous donation is common in this subculture (or subreddit), it happens nearly everywhere financial need is expressed.

In a fall 2014 pilot study, I examined the intriguing relationship between charities—specifically 501(c)3 organizations working toward humanitarian ends—and anonymity. This study strengthened the initial hypothesis that donor anonymity is a major part of a charity’s viability. But it also suggested that charities are not actively addressing anonymity or how to further engage online communities. Helen Nissenbaum, in “The Meaning of Anonymity in an Information Age,” gives tools to answer the question, “Would [protecting anonymity] be a good thing for community, responsibility, free expression, political participation, and personal
fulfillment?” This paper provides a framework for how charities might address anonymity, online communities, and the current policy questions that could affect all of these interrelated parties.

**ANONYMITY AND CHARITIES**

In this conversation, the interests of charities and the general Internet are parallel: to reach the desired audience on their terms, to access the information they need, and to have their rights and data protected. Yet this is only the interest of *some* donors; in fact, the decisions that donors make when giving to a charity reflect the levels of identifiability described by several independent researchers.

Exploring, this idea, I created a spectrum of donor visibility as part of a grounded theory project that became the foundational vocabulary of this paper. This spectrum is similar to those created by Polonetsky and Gary Marx, but specifically addresses categories of identifiability in reference to the donor-charity relationship. It is impossible to talk about anonymity without addressing what it is not: transparency or identifiability. These two opposites form the extremes of each of these spectrums, but the charts differ in the technical and social descriptions that delineate each level. Note that each level involves interaction. As Marx writes, “Anonymity is fundamentally social” (100).

Beginning with the question, “Why do people donate anonymously to charities?” and considering a variety of nonprofit organizations in order to differentiate the types of communications used by universities, aid organizations, and awareness organizations, it became clear that the choices to be anonymous, visible, or publicly praised for donations are indicative of
the type of connection the donor wants to have with the charity. Placing these choices on a spectrum of visibility affords a visual analysis of the similarities and differences in each type of donor-charity connection.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, the research question evolved: What levels of visibility do donors choose when giving to charities, and what meanings relevant to the donor-charity relationship can be interpreted from those choices?

The spectrum of visibility is essentially a category of action involving the donor’s choices about whether to be recognized, contacted, publicized, or otherwise acknowledged by the charity and/or the interested public. Kaminski acknowledges this framework as well, referring to anonymity as existing “on a continuum of traceability” (819). Locations on the spectrum range from fully anonymous, untraceable cash donations to large, highly publicized gifts. In between these two extremes are three mid-levels of visibility: single-contact within the organization, name-only identification, and name-and-amount identification. The areas between anonymous and major recognition—neither broadcasting giving nor requesting anonymity, but a step away from fully public—is where the greater conversation about online anonymity, pseudonymity, and mob behavior becomes relevant.

Where online anonymity and charitable giving come together is in the factors that affect the internal state of someone who wants to give. The elements of crowd behavior as addressed earlier may compel someone to give to a certain charity when they would not have done so by their independent volition. The power of the online mob may also affect the manner in which one gives, especially whether or not they disclose the fact or the amount that they donate. The Spectrum of Visibility study distinguishes between donors’ internal motivations and external

\textsuperscript{6} See Appendix A.
reasons for giving. When asked directly why they might give to a specific charity, donors are cognisant of the charity’s basic objectives and wish to support them. This is likely a safe assumption—that the reason anyone would give an amount of money to a cause is a belief in the work of that charity—but it is supported by data. Donor Sarah Evans of Spokane, WA explains, “we usually pick [a specific charity] based on personal connection of some sort and/or based on our perception of how badly the service is needed and how effective the charity seems to be.” Donor Annette McFarland of Washington, D.C. says she gives “if I care about the organization and its mission.” Reasons for giving are overt, simple explanations for support of a specific cause. More reasons arise during controversies, and are often thrust upon donors with strong ties to the organization. These reasons are closely tied to, but distinctive from, what donors believe about the general concept of giving.

A donor’s giving ethics apply generally to the overall concept of philanthropy. In a most basic sense, the common ethic represented by nearly all charitable donations is one of social responsibility. Responses to the question, “Why give?” tend to reference the general moral obligation to care for those in need. Donor Tisha Havens of Austin, TX says, “Most of our donation budget goes to help my fellow man, generally in ways which I believe will help them help themselves.” Donor Sarah Evans (continuing her comments from the previous question) explains, “[I give] because I have more money than I absolutely need to live on and should share it with other people who aren't as lucky as us.” Another donor (who wishes to remain anonymous) responds, “We have a duty as Americans and humans to pitch in when catastrophe hits. I'll never forget the story of the destitute Ugandan women who gathered $1,000 to donate to Katrina relief. If they can pull together a few dollars each, so can I at least once per year. Call it
human brotherhood.” A simple recognition of morality and care for others seems to apply to all levels of donor visibility as they are currently understood.

If morality, as described by these donors, is at the core of charitable giving, it might be logical to extrapolate that discussion of that giving would be as commonplace as recommending a restaurant or artist to a friend. Yet it remains part of the cultural taboo against talking about financial matters. In fact, charities that have tried to function without the option to donate anonymously have been coerced into allowing it. Alex Budak, co-founder of the crowdfunding site StartSomeGood.com, reports that StartSomeGood received pushback for only offering visible donation options when the company launched. He explains,

*We actually launched without this anonymous option, but soon after had a lot of demand to make it an option. We now provide three options for what information appears: Name and donation amount, Just name, Completely anonymous.*

Anonymity matters to donors. Psychological concepts of altruism provide some context for this paradoxical taboo. Teresa Preston-Werner, founder of Omakase Charity, discussed this at length during the Spectrum of Visibility study:

*I knew that anonymous donations tend to be tied to being very... wary of self-indulgence.*

*People avoid that, putting your name on the side of a building. And I get that, it looks grotesque, you don't want to draw attention to yourself, you're trying to be altruistic.*

Auguste Comte defined altruism as a lifestyle of performing good deeds for its own sake, or even at a cost, without receiving any benefit or reward for one’s self. Altruism explains what would otherwise be a schism in the logic of giving: if altruism, not simple morality, is at the core of
why donors give, receiving recognition or praise “cancels out” the intended purity of giving. Though data privacy may also be a factor, anonymity seems to be more valuable to donors because it is an essential component to the spirit of altruism.

Others argue that pure altruism does not exist, and define one’s feeling of satisfaction, clear consciousness, or self-actualization as being a reward that humans seek through good deeds. To the extent that good deeds like charitable donations might clear one’s conscience, studies in social psychology claim that the concept of “moral licensing” may have answers. Moral licensing argues that when one has an option to do something altruistic or morally upright, such as purchasing an ethical product (or giving to a charity), one may later feel at liberty to do something immoral. As one study states, “moral self-licensing occurs because good deeds make people feel secure in their moral self-regard” (Elliot et al. 1). In fact, this ideological framework is at the heart of many critical think-pieces that have derailed otherwise successful charity campaigns. It manifests as something like, “people are doing this for attention, not for the good of the charitable cause, and that is not acceptable.” Basically, donors can be criticized for appearing to act outside of altruistic motivations. Thus, anonymity may also serve to protect donor reputations from such criticism.

Yet the anonymity that donors deeply value is problematic for charities. The life of a nonprofit organization is more dependent upon steady, long-term relationships with high-value donors, than sporadic or one-time donors. Anonymity separates the donor from the channel of

\[h\] See Nietzsche, David Kelley, Ayn Rand, etc.
communications that would allow the charity to form a consistent connection.\(^i\) The lack of donor information or identification can be misconstrued as evidence of dishonesty or unethical behavior, as charities are held to a very high standard of transparency.

As online viral campaigns become a major avenue of income for charities, how should charities address this shift? Do real name policies truly create the safe, friendly communities that facilitate beneficial conversation among invested people? If anonymity is set to become a thing of the Internet’s past, how should charities respond? In reviewing the state of charities, and the state of personal data, there is no doubt that shifts in one’s ability to be anonymous will cause shifts in the nonprofit sector. In light of the importance of anonymity for charities, as well as the consistent loss of narrative control during both daily operations and anomalous situations, it is clear that nonprofits need both a fresh understanding and a new approach to online anonymity.

**Research Methods**

The research methods employed in this thesis combine digital ethnography, grounded theory, and discourse analysis. This is a distinctly qualitative study, relying on thorough descriptions of the context and experience within the observed online communities. These descriptions rely upon the subjective norms of each community, allowing the participants to

\(^i\) For extremely high-value donors, however, taxes and technicalities prohibit absolute anonymity. Some state and federal laws require identification for transactions above a certain value, and for distribution of any tax benefits to which donors may be entitled.
reveal and define what is acceptable speech and/or behavior. These loosely defined “communities” are what Danah Boyd would call “networked publics.” She explains, 

*While networked publics share much in common with other types of publics, the ways in which technology structures them introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments* (39).

The affordances of these conversation spaces create unique challenges for charities. Charities know that their reputations matter and must be carefully maintained. While real name policies are a tempting option to that end, is it true that the resulting reduction or elimination of anonymous conversation would be the best option for charities to maintain narrative control?

Using a grounded theory approach, the aforementioned pilot study included interviews and observed interactions with sources representing six nonprofit organizations: Omakase Charity, Invisible Children Inc., StartSomeGood, the Georgetown University Board of Regents, World Vision, and one major disaster relief organization. Except in the case of World Vision, interviews were conducted with members of the organization’s leadership and a small number of donors who expressed interest in the study. Data from World Vision donors was gathered from World Vision’s Facebook page, Twitter mentions, official press releases, and popular blog posts representing the issues of a controversy regarding their hiring policy in late March of 2014.¹ Public archives of conversations about each organization were observed on Facebook, Buzzfeed, reddit, and within the comments of relevant YouTube videos, limited to the weeks following each organization’s controversial situation.

Once the spectrum of visibility was largely developed, a second case study was conducted observing the responses to Malala Yousafzai’s Nobel Peace Prize. This employed the observation and description methods from the previous study, but incorporated the privacy policies of each online community to address whether real name policies affect the types of discourse that occur there. This case study concludes that the cultural norms of a platform can be a larger force of speech control than identifiability. By presenting an observation-based, contextualized perspective on anonymous and identifiable interactions, the often-ambiguous factor of “culture” can be tangibly addressed in policy and legal decisions regarding online communications. This is relevant to the discussion of charities in considering the question of whether anonymity or other factors are responsible for creating uncivil, negative environments that contribute to public relations crises for charities.

To apply this method to the present question of charities and anonymity, case studies will focus on the day-to-day operations of the Susan G. Komen Foundation, and the ALSA Ice Bucket Challenge viral campaign during the summer of 2014. The Ice Bucket Challenge is one of the most widely-known, most successful, and most written-about viral campaigns, while the Susan G. Komen Foundation represents the operations of a major charity that is consistently under the close watch of critics and dissenters. The purpose of choosing these two case studies is to address both persistent and anomalous conversations that can affect the reputation of a charity and its operations.

During the summer of 2014, social media sites were flooded with videos of individuals, families, and entire companies dousing themselves in ice cold water. The participants typically
mention something about ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), followed by a challenge to others in their network to participate by either donating $100 to the ALS Association, or to take the “ice bucket challenge” themselves. Some confusion and criticism emerged over whether participating in the challenge released the freezing and soaked person from actually donating to the cause, yet (as revealed in the data) most participants report both donating and dousing. Over a few short months, the ALS Association experienced an unprecedented level of scrutiny, as well as an unprecedented increase in donations. As of the time of writing, the ALSA has allocated over $50 million of those donations toward research of the disease. The Ice Bucket Challenge phenomenon is an ideal case study, as its sheer volume seemed to magnify each element of the viral charity campaign life cycle.

In contrast to this explosive amount of attention, the Susan G. Komen Foundation receives both consistent support and consistent scrutiny for how it carries out its mission to raise awareness and research funding for breast cancer. Their trademark pink ribbons adorn millions of products, and pink-clad runners (survivors and supporters alike) participate in an annual “Race for the Cure” fundraising event all over the country. Like clockwork, the excitement for this event is met with criticism over how the foundation manages its finances, how effective treatments have become, and whether the money from purchasing those pink-ribbon-clad products truly helps individuals living with breast cancer. The consistency of these conversations form a reliable picture of the everyday reputation management that charities must consider.

Conversations about both of these organizations are examined on Facebook, reddit, and Buzzfeed, as well as any specific websites or widely-read blog posts that were commonly referred to by participants in these forums. Examining Facebook and reddit replicates the type of...
data gathered in both pilot studies, as mentioned above. By observing conversations on two sites with opposing policies on user identification, I form an ethnographic comparative study of the effects of these policies on the discourse surrounding the chosen charities. Buzzfeed, featuring two side-by-side commenting interfaces, offers a combinatory micro-comparison in one environment.

One critical component of the data is possibly the most deliberately ignored piece of writing on any given website: the privacy policy and End User License Agreement. Facebook has a well-known and systematically enforced real name policy, while reddit has no restrictions or rules about how users identify themselves. Buzzfeed is an interesting middle ground, as it uses both Facebook’s commenting API in conjunction with its own native commenting interface. Other sites’ policies will be detailed as needed in comparison with these three. A careful examination of these binding legal documents forms a solid foundation for legal comparison of each site, and gives conversations about culture a firm place in policy making.

Having established which sites, organizations, and time frames will form the case studies, I began the careful balance between live observation and public archival research. To avoid the potential biases of filtering algorithms used on some sites, each comment thread was read in chronological order rather than in curated views, which sort comments by popularity, user votes, or the established reputation of the commenter. To maintain observational neutrality, a registered account was only used when necessary to view conversations, but no commenting, upvoting, questions or other types of interactions are posted by the researcher. I remained a “lurker,” which, while a virtually invisible entity on the site, is still a critical element of successful
communities of practice (Bedford). So, lurking can be considered legitimate online participation while avoiding the potential effects of participation by commenting, voting, liking, or otherwise advocating for a certain viewpoint.

In observing the conversations, I began by considering the most evident conversational elements: criticism, support, stories, emotion (which can be positive or negative, and is usually indicated by WRITING IN ALL CAPS or using lots of exclamation points!!!!!), likes or votes, reputation of the commenter (often indicated by some sort of badge icon), candor, perceived audience, perceived impact of the comment, and the offline, physical-world identity of the users. To avoid relying upon an “I know it when I see it” standard, every effort was made to explain how these emotions and subtleties were communicated in each context. It was critical to recognize where a certain behavior on one site was received very differently on another.

The framing or purpose of each online community is notably different. When examining the true effects of real name policies on online discourse, one must consider these frames to be a primary element. In terms of reputation and consequences, consider these sites’ differing methods of aggregating opinions: on reddit, users may “upvote” or “downvote” each post and comment, effectively curating the entire conversation and awarding points to those who contribute in the desired manner. On Facebook, the comparable options are “Like” or “Report.” As evidenced by Facebook’s real name policy enforcement method, the option to “Report” is highly consequential, while a “Like” is not. There are no incentives to maintain a rapport with participants in the conversation, while reddit’s point and reward system affects a user’s every interaction.

\[k\] See Justice Stewart’s definition of obscenity in Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964.
These functionalities build the context or culture in which forum discussions happen. While each forum has its established, written policies, unspoken norms can be identified by the emotions and subtleties of the conversations, as described above. In the style of grounded theory, the categories that emerge from the data attempt to represent these norms to the best of the author’s understanding.

Within these conversations, comparisons emerge between each online culture and their differing privacy policies. If current policies about real names seem to deter users from making uncivil, critical, or unprotected comments, then those policies could be an effective solution for protecting First Amendment rights as well as the operations of charities and their campaigns. Based on the data from Cho and Acquisti, whose research question could be considered parallel to this one, it is a valid supposition that real name policies reduce harassing and destructive speech. However, if correlations are loose or nonexistent between these two factors, as established by cultural experience rather than counted words, real name policies must be reexamined to consider the factors that do correlate. This conclusion might inform or suggest new online communication strategies for nonprofit organizations.

DATA

The raw facts examined here include the policies of each public online forum, the conversation that took place there within a given time frame, and the cultural norms that can be inferred from those conversations. That is to say, both words and their context form the data. According to Lessig’s framework, this method considers 1) site architecture, including comment functionality and displays of reputation or popularity, 2) policy, in how users must identify
themselves (or not), 3) market forces that incentivize organizations to engage with donors online, and 4) norms, in both the established purpose of the site and the behavior observed therein.

The chosen time frame is based on the viral life of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge campaign: roughly the end of July through August of 2014.\(^1\) Of course, an incalculable amount of conversation occurred on each of these three forums during the given time frame. In order to form a manageable case study, especially surrounding the Ice Bucket Challenge, Facebook and Buzzfeed data was limited to public posts made on verified ALS-related pages during the first two weeks of the campaign’s viral lifespan.

Data from reddit required much more discernment. Content on reddit is compiled from sources all over the Internet and organized into subreddits. Each subreddit abides by a unique set of rules and expectations for participants, which is stated alongside the forum itself, constantly visible to users.

In all six contexts (three discussion forums for each of the two nonprofit organizations), the conversations were compiled into spreadsheets, and formatted to maintain usernames, links, dates, likes/points or other badges, as well as the ability to distinguish between original posts and replies. After reviewing the site’s policy, basic functionality, and the original post’s content, each individual comment was tagged and categorized. The categories answer the question, “what is being done by what is being said?” As categories emerge, they provide insight into the users’ emotions and values, as well as the larger effect their interactions may have upon the forum as a whole. The most populated category on a forum turns out to be a descriptor of the culture, while

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\(^1\) In one case, no relevant data could be found on the forum within the given time frame. A comparable amount of data was collected from the most recent available conversations on the topic. That lack of conversation will be further discussed as a data point.
a one-off category might exemplify antinormative behavior, and thus be a turning point in the conversation. Also of note, many comments fall into multiple categories and some could not be accurately categorized at all. Any foreign-language comments were translated with the help of native speakers, as Facebook’s embedded Bing translation tool is of no help at all. Each forum is presented individually in the following section, and comparatively in the Analysis section.

**Facebook**

**ALS Ice Bucket Challenge**

Operating under the perspective validated by Cho and Acquisti’s study, Facebook maintains the following policy:

*Facebook is a community where people use their authentic identities. We require people to provide the name they use in real life; that way, you always know who you're connecting with. This helps keep our community safe. [...] The name you use should be your authentic identity; as your friends call you in real life and as our acceptable identification forms would show (Facebook.com).*

In a 2011 New York Times article, Facebook’s Vice President of Public Policy, Elliot Schrage, stated, “We fundamentally believe this leads to greater accountability and a safer and more trusted environment for people who use the service” (Sengupta). Public figures and organizations must have Pages (rather than personal Profiles), which offer a different protocol for name verification. The first set of forum data, the ALS Association’s official Facebook page, states the following policy:
The purpose of this page is to establish an online community where people with ALS, family members, caregivers and friends can interact amongst themselves and with our organization in a positive environment.

Furthermore, ALSA reserves the right to remove “posts containing profanity, profane or offensive language, [...] comments that are factually inaccurate, misleading, or defamatory, personal attacks,” and promise, “we will always do our best to respond to and correct factually inaccurate information that is posted to our page and dispel any misinformation. Personal attacks, accusations, or misleading/defamatory content does not create an atmosphere conducive to healthy dialogue.”

These policies attempt to establish culture. ALSA does diligently remove things that do not comply with their policies. A brief Google search of “comments deleted from ALS Facebook page” turns up a few petition links that had been removed from the page. One demands transparency, and suggests that their post’s quick removal from the page is due to ALSA’s possible misuse of funds, or not being transparent enough about where the money is going.\(^m\)

Commenters on these public pages, as well as Facebook’s reported 1.23 billion active monthly users, are subject to Facebook’s real name policy. Every comment and like is linked back to the user’s personal profile, over which that individual maintains privacy controls. With minimal privacy settings applied, any commenter on a public Facebook page essentially provides all of that Page’s viewers with a link to their personal information, photos, location, etc. It is unclear whether commenters (as well as the general public) are fully aware of this point of access, or if it affects their interactions on the forum.

There are three general categories in the Facebook data: positive, negative, and neutral. Generally, it is easy to determine which category a comment falls into. If a commenter states that they participated in the IBC, or if they express enthusiasm for the campaign, those are positive. Criticism, insults, and condescension towards the cause are categorized as negative. Any comments that do not mention the campaign or cause in any specific manner are neutral. Of course, not all of the comments fall cleanly into one classification. Some comments, for example, are simply to tag a friend, to call their attention to the conversation. Can we infer support from that? Can we infer awareness? Or do we just mark it as neutral? That might reduce the visible amount of support from people who do want to participate in the cause with the friend they tagged, but there’s no way to know the actual intention. Neutral must be considered within the context of that person visiting the given site in the first place.

Before the Ice Bucket Challenge, conversation on the ALSA page largely consisted of personal stories: people shared personal experiences with the disease, whether a loved one or they themselves have it. These stories are short and simple, consisting of diagnosis dates, symptoms, how long since someone had passed away, and people expressing sympathy. Some are highly emotional, as displayed by words like “heartbroken,” and related emojis. Such a personal, emotive forum is not what one might consider prime Internet real estate for debates and argument.

Of the 342 comments collected from this page, a majority (191) are positive responses to the Ice Bucket Challenge:
However, beginning with the second post related to the Ice Bucket Challenge (around August 11-12), a shift is evident: about half of all comments praising the campaign also take on a defensive tone against a handful of critics:
The supporters and loved ones who typically comment begin to explain and defend their investment and argue for the value, importance, and worth of this cause in the world of research funding. That shift fundamentally changes the tone and experience of this discussion page. These people, formerly connected only by the grief and empathy from experiences with this disease, find themselves defending the worth of awareness and funding. The empathy diminishes, and supporters become defenders.

The number of defensive comments might lead one to believe that criticism is abundant on the forum; it is not. Only about 20 comments were distinctly negative or critical. Even so, they pulled half of the supportive attention away from the positivity and empathy that is normally experienced on the ALSA page. While negativity or criticism does not exactly dominate the discussion, it distinctly changes the experience of participating in this forum. It no longer feels safe and supportive, but critical, defensive, and debateably (rather than essentially) important to the people there.
What caused this shift toward defensiveness? One commenter in particular, G., seems to be the object of most of the defensive responses in one thread. Rather than words, he posted memes that suggest the Ice Bucket Challenge encourages wasting water, and that the money will not make a difference in finding a cure for ALS. The number of likes on his posts suggest that he is merely the voice of other dissenters. He is also active: G. makes 7 of the 120 comments in a single thread, each making a separate criticism of the campaign. Even with an official statement from ALSA not claiming ownership (“it grew organically”), G. calls the Ice Bucket Challenge an “unethical marketing ploy”, “forcing to give when they should give because they want to”, and questions what ALSA is going to do with the money. Mainly in response to G., this thread is full of personal attacks:
'Merica 😐

AMERICA

AFRICA

Like · Reply · 12 · September 30, 2014 at 11:06am

Hide 33 Replies

SO, LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT

YOU WASTE CLEAN WATER AS A CHALLENGE, IN ORDER TO AVOID RAISING MONEY FOR CHARITY?

Like · 43 · September 30, 2014 at 11:07am

Idiot!!

Like · October 1, 2014 at 9:33am

The ALS Association All - Please refrain from personal attacks. This is a page of support and information for people living with ALS and their families.

Like · 12 · October 1, 2014 at 9:43am
It is important to note here that the emotional energy of the ALSA page was not increased or decreased, but redirected. Emotions initially ranged from grieving a death or diagnosis to flat-out demanding a cure from the ALSA (as if they could provide it). Once the Ice Bucket Challenge and its dissenters appear on the forum, all of that emotional energy is being directed to those who dare to criticize a charity campaign. It is also important to note that G., in this case, is not necessarily a troll (despite being called one several times). He is presenting an alternative viewpoint, but it is unwelcome and quite disruptive in this context. This is a vulnerable moment for people living with ALS and their families; the difficulty that defines their life is suddenly in the national spotlight and brings both support and criticism. Responses to criticism in this forum display that vulnerability by strongly pushing back against dissenters. However, criticism is not always so unwelcome. When we turn forums that are meant for discussion and debate, the criticism is both more intense and more accepted.

With these questions of origin and validity, we must consider what the Ice Bucket Challenge actually did. It is arguably the most successful charity campaign of all time, raising an estimated $115 million for the ALS Association, yet it was not designed or implemented by a charity. This origin story is possibly its greatest strength as it displays the essential elements donors seem to want from charities: authenticity, transparency, and the undeniable sense that people genuinely and selflessly care about the cause. The Ice Bucket Challenge came from
individual people, not from a faceless entity, which may have made it more difficult to initially criticize. Yet criticism is apparent here and elsewhere.

The debate is not about ALS itself; all acknowledge that it is a horrible disease. Yet as something explosively good happened for the sufferers, the rate of negativity on the Internet from the day-to-day did not change. It shifted from being focused on the disease itself, lack of funding/support, to how it was being supported or funded. Rather than being supportive, dissenters on this Facebook page accused Ice Bucket Challenge participants of being narcissistic and attention-seeking instead of altruistic, as if the two concepts were mutually exclusive. This may explain why 96 commenters stated that participants “should donate,” but only 10 directly claim to have personally donated. This affirms the results of previous studies: that altruism and anonymity go hand-in-hand.

A similar shift in emotional attention happens on the public Facebook page of Pete Frates. A former college baseball player living with ALS, Frates is largely credited with starting the Ice Bucket challenge. Before the campaign, Frates’ fundraising page typically received 5 or 6 comments per post from family and friends offering encouragement. As soon as the Ice Bucket Challenge begins to achieve national attention, professional athletes appear on Frates’ page in challenge videos. The profanity and criticism that first appears here is not directed toward the challenge itself, but to the participants as expressions of sports rivalries. Those comments are labeled “peripheral bickering.” But once the criticism itself gains more attention, the level of bickering does not change; it is redirected toward the campaign and the ALS Association.
Susan G. Komen Foundation

The official Facebook page of the Susan G. Komen Foundation maintains the following policy:

*We hope you will find this page to be a source of awareness, education and support of our promise to save lives and end breast cancer. While we love that you want to share your thoughts with us, in order to foster this kind of community and keep within the parameters of our family-friendly culture, we may have to remove some comments.*

The rules and discussions here have many common categories with the ALSA page: stories and empathy. But here, there is a major wave of positivity and determination. That marks a difference between ALS and breast cancer that creates fundamentally different cultures of conversation: breast cancer is treatable and survivable, while ALS is not. That difference is evident not only in the presence of celebratory comments, but also in the fact that they make up half of the all the comments on this forum.
Of 359 examined comments, 180 are celebrations of the victory announced by the Komen foundation. Only 8 express grief, 18 express empathy, 44 are survivors or hope to be, including the 27 expressing determination to survive and be healthy. Though a handful of critical comments are offered here (16, to be exact), most are coupled with additional information or suggestions. “What about this other type of cancer? What about the 1% who don’t get that survival rate? Here’s more to read, here’s more to do.”

Yet it is here, among these reasonable questions and respectful responses, that we find our first true troll:
Trolls are the ultimate example of antinormative behavior, intentionally stoking the sparks of dissent on message boards. Although drastic examples of harassment, hate speech, and threats by trolls were discussed earlier, this particular instance fits a narrower definition. R. is not so much pushing his Constitutional rights as he is being annoying. Even so, he does not receive the same intense, defensiveness response as the “hecklers” on the ALSA page, though all of these commenters are equally identifiable. Note this difference.

These dedicated Facebook pages are set up to be a safe place to discuss emotionally difficult topics and connect with others in similar situations. While discussion and connection do happen, a viral campaign (especially a wildly successful one) invites more outsiders into the conversation without diluting the emotional responses. The emotional energy of these threads turns from empathetic to charged and defensive, and even insults and personal attacks. Though commenters are identifiable to the point of their personal profiles being accessible to everyone in the forum, fiery dissent is quite common.
reddit

In sharp contrast to Facebook, reddit’s user agreement simply states,

To participate on reddit, you must create an account that includes a username and password ("Your Account") and, if you want to be able to reset your password or have us contact you, an email address as well. Of course, you can also browse reddit without logging in.

Their FAQ even encourages users to maintain multiple accounts as is fitting to their needs (reddit.com). Reddit has a much smaller user base than Facebook, but still boasts a community of 178 million active users per month. The site is divided into topical “subreddits” that help users focus discussions. Each subreddit contains its own rules of engagement, including things that must not be discussed in that context.

Generally, conversations on reddit evoke a poorly-organized undergraduate political science course. Debates of intellectually valid topics are intended, but points of argument are loosely articulated and tend to jump to conclusions. Even so, threads are coherent and disagreements usually take the form of questions rather than insults. It is common for users to discuss source material, either to request it, provide it, or debate its validity. This differs from the observed Facebook conversations, in which personal opinions (rather than points of research) tend to be the center of discussions.
Regarding the Ice Bucket Challenge, reddit conversations revealed a wider variety of categories. The three categories that worked on Facebook, positive, negative, and neutral, do not cleanly fit here. As the first set of data comes from the r/funny subreddit, new categories predictably include joke, facetiousness, skepticism, and sarcasm, among others. Of the 167 comments reviewed, the most common categories are facts (29) and jokes (23). In many instances, the reddit community categorize themselves with a series of acronyms, or by linking to other relevant subreddits. These expressions and acronyms appear in my categorizations: “tin foil hat time,” referring to a mock conspiracy theory, and “TIL” meaning “today I learned,” among others.

If anonymity encourages antinormative behavior, what does that look like on a site where jokes and facetiousness about a deadly disease are acceptable? These comments are definitely antinormative to those made by identifiable users on Facebook, but do not communicate any ill intent toward the topic or those affected by it. The function of humor in the discussion seems to be fluidity; it keeps the conversations going. If a response to a joke is not another joke, it is likely to be in the “general discussion” category: loosely related to the topic at hand, but resembling idle chatter.

The most common category, facts, represents a core value of the reddit community. Users on reddit love to provide, discuss, question, and verify information. The categories resemble debate vocabulary: questions, rebuttals, requests for further information, anecdotal evidence, facts, emotional appeals, and very, very few (if any) personal attacks. Even profanity seems more contextualized. It is common for someone with a verifiable, yet still anonymous, personal
connection to a fact to display that information, and for it to be upvoted quite high. Of the 29 fact comments posted, 16 offered personal connections or first-hand anecdotes to verify the information.

This is in line with another rule of reddit, which is more suggestion than law: the best way to fix incorrect information is to post the correct information next to it. In this spirit, incorrect information is rarely deleted or even downvoted. It is invalidated, but maintained within the thread.

Though these two categories contain more content than the others, neither one could be considered a majority. There is no “normal” or “dominant” way of discussing these issues, as
was evident in the Facebook data. While this might appear to be the chaos expected of anonymous forums, it is quite the opposite. The variety of comments creates a rich and informative setting that welcomes alternative viewpoints and avoids judgement. There is no majority, thus it cannot rule.

*Susan G. Komen Foundation*

Discussions about the Susan G. Komen foundation led me to r/asksocialscience, a discussion forum that specifically asks people with social science degrees to answer related questions. This is consistent with the valuing of information identified in the Ice Bucket Challenge conversations. Of 128 comments, most are related to facts; more than 30 either provide or request information. Generally, this forum is thoughtful, respectful, informative, and just as varied as other subreddits examined here.

I've been hearing a lot of people talking about charity cannibalism because of the Ice Bucket challenge. Is that a real, documented phenomenon?

I understand that there are crappy charities like the Susan G. Komen foundation for breast cancer that don't really donate much of their money but I don't know if I really buy that donating to ALS means I won't donate to a different cause later. Obviously, there's a finite amount of money I'm willing to donate, but are there actual studies on the net effect? I mostly donate impulsively, so I figure I might just never donate that money and buy myself something instead.

I'll be blunt: based on scanning academic sources (no mentions of 'charity cannibalism'), your definition, asking around my department, and what I can find by googling, there is no reason to believe that 'charity cannibalism' has any social scientific meaning.

Put another way: no.

The second set of reddit data on this topic, however, comes from r/conspiracies, a forum for exploring hidden plots with sinister goals. In other words, this is a troll lair, a home for cynics and skeptics looking for the worst in any situation. But they are methodical. Redditors follow their own rules religiously, and and comments deemed unhelpful are downvoted and hidden.
While some emotional responses to the topic itself are present, personal attacks to others on the forum are practically nonexistent. Disagreement comes in the form of requests for source material or clarification, or provision of counterpoint sources. Users quote one another specifically in rebuttals, and freely take jokes deep into the comment threads when they do agree on something.

TL;DR: The Susan G. Komen Foundation is a self-serving parasite that hinders actual breast cancer research and occasionally behaves like a copyright troll.
In many ways, reddit is not as user-friendly as Buzzfeed or Facebook. Its initial appearance of chaos and out-datedness is a barrier to entry, and its wide variety of content can seem overwhelming. There are also abbreviations and jargon that mark certain users as community insiders, and require some explanations to new participants. Yet the conversations examined here are anything but chaotic or unwelcoming. In fact, subreddits offer more in-depth conversation and deeper analysis of both of these organizations than can be found on any of their official pages.

**Buzzfeed**

Buzzfeed’s privacy policy includes the following:

> Some of your activity on and through the Services is public by default. This may include, but is not limited to, content you have posted or shared publicly on the Site or otherwise through the Services, such as written posts, comments, or other submissions by you to the Site. [...] You shall not: (i) select or use as a username a name of another person with the intent to impersonate that person; (ii) use as a username a name subject to any rights of a person other than you without appropriate authorization; or (iii) use, as a username, a name that is otherwise offensive, vulgar or obscene.

Buzzfeed combines the two forum interfaces previously discussed: users can participate using Facebook’s commenting API, or Buzzfeed’s native commenting interface. While discussion and identifiability is encouraged, it is not a social network—it is a news site. Thus, people gather to discuss the issue at hand with less connection to their personal identity and community. The interface changes the context.
**Ice Bucket Challenge**

Buzzfeed’s open platform hosts a wide variety of content related to the Ice Bucket Challenge. Most articles are compilations of the “best” challenge videos, many of which are posted by celebrities, web personalities, and people generally considered attractive or humorous. Despite the generally celebratory tone of each of these articles, not much positivity about the Ice Bucket Challenge is found in the discussions.

Of 141 comments on three articles, 36 are criticism, 11 are cynicism, and 18 are clarifications of the details of the content. Only 13 are positive, 10 of which demonstrate positivity by being defensive of the campaign, similar to the defensiveness discussed in the ALSA Facebook section. Within the cynical and critical posts, six outline that there is a “right” or “wrong” way to participate in the trend, calling out individuals who just want attention, rather than to donate to a worthy cause.

*Jo*:

So everyone who did this...didn't donate? Stupid.

*Sarah*

It's for a good cause, people, calm it down with the negativity.

*Rebecca*

Seriously, people working together for any reason, stepping out of their comfort zones and doing so for no benefit except that of knowing you've made more people aware of the cause is pretty awesome!
It is in this “you are doing it right or not” content that we find these users’ views of altruism: any element of self-focus or attention-seeking cancels the good deeds done. So while calling attention to one’s self is frowned upon here, three commenters defended the worth of the cause by revealing that they have donated to it. This demonstrates a shift in the behavior of donors during a viral campaign: the usually-required anonymity of altruism falls second to defending the cause and ensuring its continued support. Interestingly, these three statements about donating were made by commenters using the Facebook API, and no such statements were made by users on the Buzzfeed comment interface. This micro-comparison is one element that suggests what the data at large is beginning to show: that identifiability affects discourse.

Susan G. Komen Foundation

In contrast to the previous public forums, very few conversations about the Susan G. Komen foundation occurred on Buzzfeed during the chosen time frame. This is likely due to Buzzfeed’s primary purpose as a news site, rather than a daily discussion forum. That is to say, if nothing controversial or “newsworthy” is happening, the organization will not be a topic of discussion. In fact, the two-year-old discussions that are available discuss a public controversy regarding the Komen foundation’s relationship with Planned Parenthood. As this is quite a
separate issue than the everyday operations of the foundation, more general, recent discussion of breast cancer research funding were chosen as the data point for this section.

While staff writers create some articles, any BuzzFeed user may add images, quizzes, videos, or other content, and tag the material so that it appears alongside related content. This functionality networks the entire site together—official and unofficial content alike—and lets all related articles rise to the top of the site on the coattails of one viral piece. In other words, if an article about a specific organization goes viral, the topic as a whole is likely to receive more attention. For that reason, articles about breast cancer in general were considered in the absence of content directly related to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The conversations discussed here took place on articles about breast cancer awareness campaigns, events, and art projects. The Komen Foundation was directly referenced in each conversation.

Of only 46 comments, 18 voice overt disapproval of the Komen foundation’s operations, and two directly accuse them of financial dishonesty.

**Comment:**
The Susan G. Komen Race to the Bottom of a Bottomless Money Pit, coming soon to your city.

**Tag:**
Reply · Like · 3 · Follow Post · March 11, 2013 at 5:58pm

**Comment:**
The Pink Ribbon has changed, or been stolen. In 2013 pink ribbons are merely a way to use breasts to sell products but without using cleavage.

**Tag:**
Reply · Like · Follow Post · March 13, 2013 at 10:30pm

**Comment:**
People already know that breast cancer exists, we don’t need any more pink shit to tell us. How about we fund research on finding a cure for like, all cancers?

**Tag:**
Reply · Like · 12 · Follow Post · November 19, 2012 at 1:04pm
Furthermore, of the 11 emotional responses, 8 express cynicism, and 7 insist that research should be a greater focus, suggesting that awareness efforts are fruitless. Only one offers empathy, and even that to the disapproving voices. This is generally a very negative conversation.

Buzzfeed is comparable to reddit or Facebook in that the initial content—the post or article itself—sets the tone for the conversation. Comments either agree or disagree with it, and responding in the antinormative is received differently on each platform. With these descriptions and specifics in mind, we may now turn to a larger comparative analysis of these communities and conversations.

ANALYSIS

In both anomalous and everyday situations, conversations about nonprofits seem to contain an assumed “right” and “wrong” way to be involved, create awareness, or donate. While some users on all three of these forums make negative comments toward the charity itself, none disagreed with their goals. Some agree so deeply with the stated goal of the charity, “to find a cure,” “to fund research,” “to raise awareness,” and to continue their work that they lashed out against those who offered even polite criticism. In other forums, the charity is scrutinized and supported, but in a controlled and civil manner. Above all, the data does not show a correlation between identifiability of commenters and civil conversation space. This allows us to discount anonymity as a possible cause of hateful, harassing speech in these contexts.
From each of these public forums, seven cultural elements emerge that can assist in understanding the conversations that take place:

1. Barriers to entry - These can take the form of all four of Lessig’s forces. In terms of architecture: is the forum accessible technologically? In many ways, both architecture and markets are invisible to users either in the website infrastructure itself, or the financial constraints of the organizations in discussion. All three of these websites are free to use, assuming an Internet connection is available. Norms that become barriers might take the form of language; notice that conversations examined were in English, with a few exceptions. Policies create barriers to entry based on age, registration with the site, and identifiability requirements. As described previously, Facebook’s real name policy has created barriers to entry for various populations for whom legal identity is not consistent with their social identity.

2. Intents and purposes of the site - The types of discourse found in these forums are affected by more than just the names that accompany content. Facebook frames its community as an augmentation of real life, reddit is primarily a discussion forum, and Buzzfeed is a news and pop culture content site. Their policies reflect these core differences. Additionally, it is crucial to understand how the topic of conversation affects the culture. While the Komen Foundation deals with a disease that is often treatable, thus including survivors in these discussions, ALS is a terminal diagnosis. The tone of conversation reflects this difference quite clearly. Look back at how much encouragement is present in the conversations about breast cancer. There was nothing
that might be considered encouragement on the ALS boards, and there is certainly no celebration, just empathy.

3. Established values of the community - Values may take the form of both written policy and unspoken norms. As in any culture, the unspoken values are often not revealed until they are violated and met with a negative response. For example, the ALSA Facebook page specifically states that their forum is a place of support and education for people living with ALS and their loved ones. Various subreddits state intentions to discuss humorous or controversial issues with strict rules against sharing personal information.

4. Incentives for rule-following - Facebook likes may be one of the most well-known social media incentives. But they are limited: it is a small gesture to like a post or comment, and there is no “dislike” or opposite gesture available. Unpopular posts, if not severe enough to be reported for policy violations, are simply forgotten. Buzzfeed does feature a greater incentive to make popular comments by rewarding consistent users with a “Top Commenter” badge. Reddit features a more complex upvote/downvote system, allowing users to accumulate points or “gold” for popular content. Such incentives encourage normative behavior, incentivizing posts with which other users will engage, rather than posts that challenge the popular mindset.

5. Consequences for rule-breaking - As stated above, Facebook does not offer a way to dislike a comment without reporting the user for rule violation. This is a relatively serious procedure: individuals reported for enough policy violations may be permanently banned from the platform. Buzzfeed follows suit here. Unpopular reddit posts encourage engagement rather than conflict. In fact, the downvote button contains the title text, “This
isn’t a disagree button. Use selectively.” Downvotes identify posts that do not contribute to the discussion; downvoted content is hidden, but remains accessible to curious redditors. Reporting users is also an option, but is reserved for severe content violations, such as sexualizing minors or hate speech.

6. Moderation - Who is tasked with maintaining the content of each forum? While the automated point systems do a large part of the work, invested individuals are often employed or volunteered to more specifically maintain the discourse. The level of investment of the moderators matters a great deal in keeping discussions within the guidelines and expectations of the community. Public Facebook pages are moderated by each individual organization, while Buzzfeed and reddit “mods” patrol problematic areas on their platforms.

7. Relationships among participants outside of the platform - These relationships typically do not exist in public forums. In this particular area, Facebook suffers a serious disconnect between the stated purpose of the site and how participants use it, especially with organizations increasingly relying upon their public Facebook pages to communicate with supporters. In this way, Facebook’s culture has outgrown its reliance upon communities that are “authentic” to the offline world; rapport matters when users know one another in an offline social context, but real names mean nearly nothing on public pages where conversants are worlds apart.

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n These relationships obviously do exist on Facebook user profiles, which are designed to connect people who are connected “in real life.” Personal profiles were not considered within the bounds of this study, yet anecdotal and personal evidence suggests that external social incentives do affect the civility of online conversations.
The forces outlined here bring a great amount of reasoning to both the anonymous and identifiable crowd behavior that is possible in online public forums. Returning to Le Bon, he claimed that,

“Crowds are not to be influenced by reasoning—The reasoning of crowds is always of a very inferior order—There is only the appearance of analogy or succession in the ideas they associate” (Ch. 3).

The findings of this study disagree with Le Bon. Crowds that form in bits and text and images have at their disposal the individual intelligence and expertise of each member. And though, psychologically, some of that may be forgotten in the midst of collective action, discernment is not always absent. Intelligence and discernment are easy to identify when crowd behavior is traceable, memorable, and automatically archived and reviewed. Automatic archives create a level of accountability and self-awareness that does not manifest in physical crowds. For this reason, perhaps the destructive deindividuation outlined by social psychologists does not quite apply to these particular online crowds.

Of course, identifiability remains an important element of culture on a public forum. For example, if Facebook’s real name policy is effective for keeping conversation civil, their public pages, and all websites that use that commenting API, would not have issues with harassment, hate speech, or trolls. But that is not what this data shows. Antinormative behavior does far more damage to an online community on Facebook than on reddit. Facebook’s real name policy creates an illusion or promise of trust that it cannot keep.

Facebook users, especially charities, rely upon user identifiability and assume that it works. This is evident in one simple piece of the data: neither the ALS Association nor the Susan
G. Komen Foundation have an official presence or even an official response on the two platforms that do not have real name policies. There are likely a few reasons for that. Considering the scalability of Reddit and Buzzfeed compared to Facebook, there is less of an audience. Charities have limited resources, so they have to get the “most bang for their buck” when it comes to engaging the public. This is the market force in action.

Of course, the data does show more profanity and crude humor on Reddit. Consider this view: the profanity, crude humor, or otherwise impolite speech on Reddit do not constitute vulgarity or negativity, but act as identifiers. This is a distinct way that the community identifies insiders and outsiders—acronyms, references to older posts, inside jokes, and reputation points. Those parts of the conversation matter because they prove the familiarity of users. Requiring proof matters—on Facebook, people are assumed to be themselves, so they carry with them their name, the established information about themselves, and the certainty that their Facebook presence will be unaffected by people who disagree with what they say. But on Reddit or Buzzfeed, a user’s entire reputation, participation in the discussion, and general enjoyment of the site hinges on being able to engage well with the community.

This data shows that civil discussion of difficult topics does occur in online anonymous settings. More importantly, civil discussion does not seem to occur in more identifiable settings. To successfully engage others in a controversial discussion is a necessary skill in a democratic society. As new media change how free speech is exercised, neither identifiability nor anonymity can be guaranteed; they both must be considered in their cultural context and appropriately protected. This stands in contrast to proposed U.S. legislation that would ban anonymous online comments, as Kaminski described. This data supports her conclusion that government-imposed
real name policies would not be constitutional, “due to the overbreadth of such a statute and the chilling of a great deal of protected speech” (818).

Legislation aside, organizations maintain the right to impose their own policies about user identification on their public forums. Considering the conversations that take place during both viral campaigns and day-to-day operations of nonprofits, it is evident that identifiability of commenters is connected to speech that is upsetting for the very people to whom these two nonprofits cater. Both social psychology and these observations confirm the connection between altruism and anonymity. These findings free nonprofits to value anonymity beyond donations, and to engage with the online mob.

CONCLUSION

In everyday and anomalous circumstances, charities need a new understanding and a new strategy to address anonymity. This study has examined how site design and policies affect cultures of conversation on public forums about two different charities. Along with identifying a more comprehensive list of factors that affect conversations, the data suggests a more accurate description of what identifiability changes in these online spaces. Real name policies place identity, rather than ideas, at the center of conversation.

Though identity-centric conversation is desirable in some contexts, it is definitely not a blanket solution to the problem of uncivil, unprotected online speech. In fact, the centrality of user identity is the basis of the personal attacks seen on Facebook, while the centrality of ideas would explain the lack of such attacks on reddit. For a community to maintain civil discourse while enforcing a real name policy, additional barriers to entry should be implemented. The
ALSAs Facebook page, for example, could limit its commenting and discussion features to those who join the page. Publicly associating one’s self with the organization in a positive way would be a deterrent to critics.

Implementing real name policies at a government level could cause problems for online charitable donations, an area where anonymity has permitted a great deal of good. Furthermore, allowing anonymity in public forum discussions about charity campaigns could form new avenues of support for worthy causes. Based on these findings, I propose that charities address anonymity at three levels: allow it, defend it, and engage with it.

Of course, it is not possible for a charity to change the identification policies of a platform like Facebook. But charities could use their public Facebook pages to direct interested people to less restrictive discussion forums. This would allow for the many donors who wish to remain anonymous to voice their support and encourage the participation of others while maintaining the lack of self-focus at the core of altruistic behavior. Proven success in this application may give charities a strong foothold in defending online anonymity in any variety of situations in which it is threatened. Maintaining a strong culture of idea-centric conversations can allow charities to harness the power of the heroic crowd.

The heroic crowd has performed innumerable acts of altruism in the past few years alone. Even Google’s auto-suggest feature is aware of their generosity.

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This quick search turns up dozens of heartwarming stories: an individual admits to struggling with finances, so a stranger sends him a pizza. A family burdened by medical bills is rapidly lifted out of debt by anonymous users of a photo-sharing site. Reddit users raise tens of thousands of dollars in just a few hours for a boy with a rare immune disorder. And, perhaps closest to this researcher’s heart, the anonymous community at Postsecret.com becomes such a refuge for individuals with suicidal ideation that it is now connected to the Suicide Hotline and has launched several offline campaigns for suicide prevention.

These phenomenal events are the direct result of the collective, anonymous altruism enabled by Internet communication technology. On a professional level, charities can engage with this powerful force in the following ways:

1. Encourage supporters to share why they donate. If they do so anonymously, offer a forum for them to display their support without disclosing their personal information.

2. Establish an official presence on anonymous discussion forums. For example, one of reddit’s more popular features is the “Ask Me Anything” thread. The transparency and immediate engagement with a prominent leader of a charity would create a new level of trust and relevance with potential supporters.

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O [http://imgur.com/gallery/fA9y1](http://imgur.com/gallery/fA9y1)
3. Learn about the values of these communities, as discussed here. Recognize that profanity is often merely an expression of strong emotion toward the topic, and that facetious joking may be willingness to engage rather than maliciousness.

Taking these steps will not eliminate the skepticism, cynicism, or outright disapproval of an organization’s operations. Though dissenters may agree that curing a fatal disease is a worthy cause, they may hold that the end does not justify the organization’s means. The combination of better barriers to entry on support forums and alternative outlets for discussing criticism anonymously would keep dissenters from disrupting the gathering places of those whose lives are affected by the issue that the organization addresses. The social paradox of criticizing how that work is done may indicate growing problems that tomorrow’s nonprofits must be equipped to solve. If charities allow, defend, and embrace online anonymity, they may find a great ally in the weird, altruistic, and quite heroic anonymous crowd.

**EPILOGUE: QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study has formulated a theory to help charities understand how to approach anonymity in the digital age. However, this is still only a theory. Much work remains to be done to successfully engage with online audiences and to understand how to build better conversation spaces on the Internet. This final section identifies the unanswered questions that remain, and suggests methods for both building upon this body of research and applying the results to nonprofit communication strategy.

First of all, the data states, “It is unclear whether commenters (as well as the general public) are fully aware of [how their personal information is tied to their public Facebook
comments], or if it affects their interactions on the forum.” Popular understanding of online privacy remains an enormously complex issue. Understanding online privacy requires technical, social, and legal knowledge, and a recognition that solutions will be different across platforms. The best research toward this end would be a collaboration with the platforms examined here, combining their expertise of the architecture, business model, and user data with user experience and social science perspectives to reach holistic solutions.

Beyond websites, the human experience of online interaction require further study. Focus groups of these sites’ users could provide useful insights about the internal states or deeper stories behind each conversations. It is difficult to tease out these complexities without discussing the conversation with its participants. The data only addresses this difficulty in marking some comments as “neutral” within the context of that person visiting the site in the first place. Individuals writing these comments would be an ideal focus group with which to begin a more involved study.

In that regard, the notable absence of official charity presences on more anonymous forums could be addressed in collaboration with either of the nonprofits studied here, or with any charitable organization. I theorize that charities avoid a distinct presence on reddit or Buzzfeed because they do not wish to associate with the genres of conversation that they think would detract from or alter the narrative about their goals. As a point of further study, a charity could implement the “allow, defend, and engage” strategy as described previously, and use their established metrics of success to determine the strategy’s effectiveness. User testing could prove or disprove any number of claims made here, and deeply contribute to the current understanding of the humanity behind online anonymity.
To further contribute to our understanding humanity on the Internet, we must reevaluate past understandings of crowd behavior in writings like those of Gustave Le Bon. This study claims that, “perhaps the destructive deindividuation outlined by social psychologists does not quite apply to these particular online crowds.” This statement is unfortunately relevant to current events that have caused public outcry over surveillance, law enforcement accountability, and the manner in which the general public expresses disapproval of government action. That is to say, does deindividuation still occur in crowds when a vast majority of participants hold a personal recording device, connected to other devices all over the world? Now that the “criminal or heroic” crowd is the connected crowd, communities and communication will continue to shift and change. Further research, in collaboration with key communications platforms like those studied here, could provide deeply necessary new understandings of humanity on the Internet.
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